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ABSTRACT

Educators can help students develop enthusiastic, committed readers who are mentally sharp by developing approaches to literature teaching that are based upon informed concepts of reading and response rather than upon conventional inherited ideas of comprehension and criticism. A study of how 15-year-old students responded to a poem indicated that the substance of the responses shared common elements; the strategies for reading and notetaking were markedly individual; and, as storytellers, the students became more deeply involved with the literature. At least three reasons exist which help to explain why reader response has replaced New Criticism's hegemony in literature teaching: it honors both the integrity of the text and of the reader; it reflects the contemporary concern for process as well as product; and it redefines the question of value. The question remains whether response-oriented practices are appropriate for work with second-language students. A series of classroom activities were set up for first-year students in a Danish university to engage them more fully in the process of response. These students found the verbal/visual combinations of the activities as engaging and accessible as had the students in the earlier study. Teaching methods based on reader-response approaches should engage and motivate students, trust the reader, trust the text, and regard the practice of critical evaluation. (Contains figures which illustrate students' responses to poems and 39 references.) (RS)

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CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

OCCASIONAL PAPERS, 13

READING AND TEACHING LITERATURE

MICHAEL BENTON

JANUARY 1993

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This paper was delivered at the British Council's Symposium on New Approaches to the Teaching of Literature at the University of Salamanca, Spain, 20-26 September 1992.

1. Introduction : Reading, Responding, Teaching

Few of us have been immune (either as teachers or as students ourselves) from a situation David Lodge describes. Writing in the T.H.E.S. some years ago, he says :

> "One feels, as a teacher, rather like a soccer referee who, having blown his whistle for the kick off, finds the players disconcertingly reluctant to make a move and is reduced to dribbling the ball himself furiously from end to end, scoring brilliant goals in undefended nets whilst the motionless players curiously look on".

With this zany, disabling John Cleese figure lurking somewhere at the back of my mind, I start from the premise that the task of literature teaching is an enabling one - to encourage students to become "keen readers". I mean keen in two senses : keen in the sense of enthusiastic and committed, and keen in the sense of mentally sharp - intellectually acute and emotionally aware.

The first implies the need for breadth and variety, for students to see themselves as habitual readers (and how often do we complain that students don't read widely or enough); and the second requires us to help students become more subtle and discerning readers.

How do we achieve this "double keenness"? My answer is by developing approaches to literature teaching that are based upon informed concepts of reading and response rather than upon conventional inherited ideas of comprehension and criticism which, in the absence of anything else, have passed for the conceptual bases for the teaching of our subject. Several reappraisals of English in the last ten years (P. Widdowson 1982, Eagleton 1983, Doyle 1989) have shown how, once it replaced Classics at the centre of the

curriculum earlier this century, English cast about for some theory and method in order to authenticate its position. In literature teaching, criticism and comprehension became the twin pillars and were soon effectively buttressed by the examination system. "Practical criticism" or "critical appreciation" became the method with sixth formers and undergraduates; comprehension exercises became the lot of schoolchildren. The essential and peculiar discipline of literature - the use of language as "symbolic form" (Langer 1953), that is, where words operate not only as a system of referential symbols but are also shaped into aesthetic forms - became distorted. Pedagogically, the 2Rs precede the 2Cs. Hence, my present purposes are :

(i) to argue that, notwithstanding the pluralism of modern literary theory, reader-response based approaches to the <u>teaching of literature</u> have now replaced the Leavis/New Criticism 'hegemony' that used to exist; and,

(ii) to show how, through looking at some work on poetry, such approaches actively engage students in ways that are likely to encourage "keen" reading and discourage David Lodge's "referee watching".

"Response" has become an umbrella term to cover a variety of interrelated processes that occur during and after reading. Two basic distinctions need to be made : first, we must differentiate between <u>primary</u> responses, "natural" activities that we can never fully know, and <u>stated</u> responses which are "artificially" elicited in speech or writing.

Secondly, in respect of these stated responses, we must distinguish between the comments readers make about the <u>process of responding</u> (what happens when they are

actually reading) and their considered responses after the process is over.

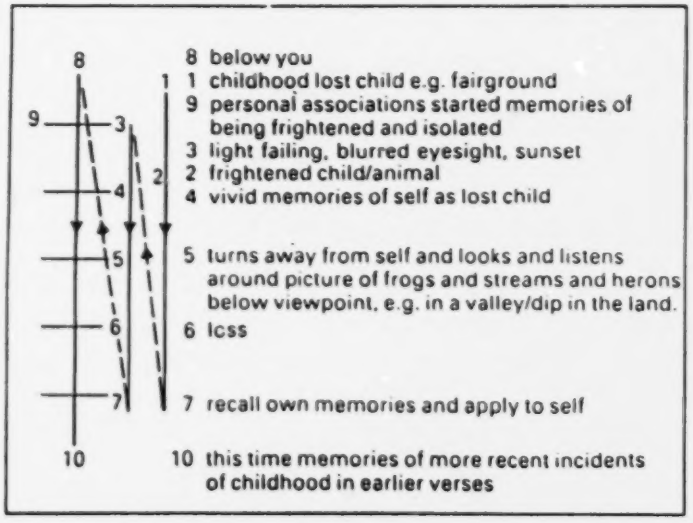
Further, if we wish to monitor readers' responses, it is prudent to keep in mind Gilbert Ryle's (1949) point that much of what purports to be introspection is, in fact, retrospection. So, if we ask readers to tell us what is going on inside their heads during reading, we must be clear about the difference between their "looking in" and their "subsequent reporting". Four years ago I published an account of some teacher-researcher enquiries (Benton et al, 1988), which explored the processes of some young readers responding to poems. The enquiries set out to monitor their stated responses using an approach I came to term "introspective recall" since this suggests both the "looking in", the positive effort at recollection, and the effect of interpreting and reconstruction when responses are articulated.

As a context for the examples with L2 students that I will introduce later, I want to indicate how some 15 year old L1 students worked on a poem of their choice. A group of students was engaged in compiling their own mini-anthology of poems. With some of their selections, they were asked to log their initial responses by jotting down all the things that occurred to them during reading and to number their jottings as they went along. They also recorded how many times they read a poem before making any notes. The classroom work was carried out by John Teasey (Benton et al, 1988).

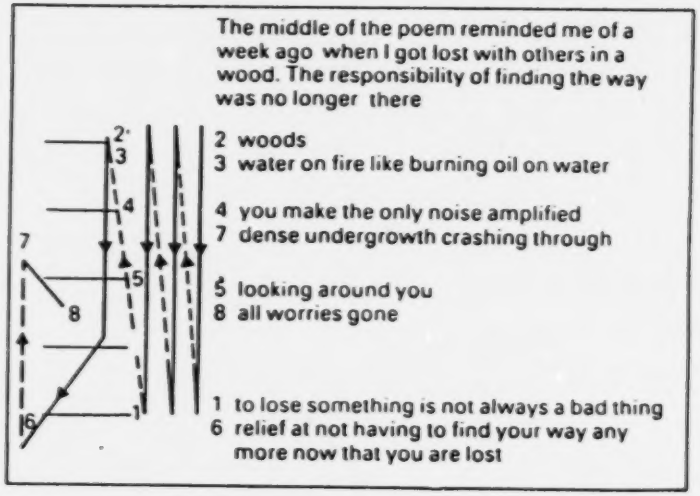
We were interested in what happens at the point of reading, in what Rosenblatt calls the "evocation". Here are three students' first responses to Brian Patten's poem "Frogs in the Wood".

Frogs in the Wood
(8) below you
(1) childhood lost
How good it would be to be lost again,
Night falling on the compass and the map
Turning to improbable flames.
Bright ashes going out in the ponds.
(9) personal associations started memories of being frightened and isolated
(3) light failing, blurred eyesight, sunset
(2) frightened child/animal
(4) vivid memories of self as lost child
And how good it would be
To stand bewildered in a strange wood
Where you are the loudest thing.
Your heart making a deafening noise.
And how strange when your fear of being lost has subsided
To stand listening to the frogs holding
Their arguments in the streams.
Condemning the barbarous herons.
(5) attention turns away from self and looks and listens around picture of frogs and streams + herons below viewpoint eg. in a valley/dip in the land.
And how right it is
To shrug off real and invented grief
As of no importance
To this moment of your life.
(6) loss
turning
When being lost seems
So much more like being found.
And you find all that is lost
Is what weighed you down.
(7) recall own memories and apply to self.
emancipation
(10) this time memories of more recent incidents of childhood in earlier verses.

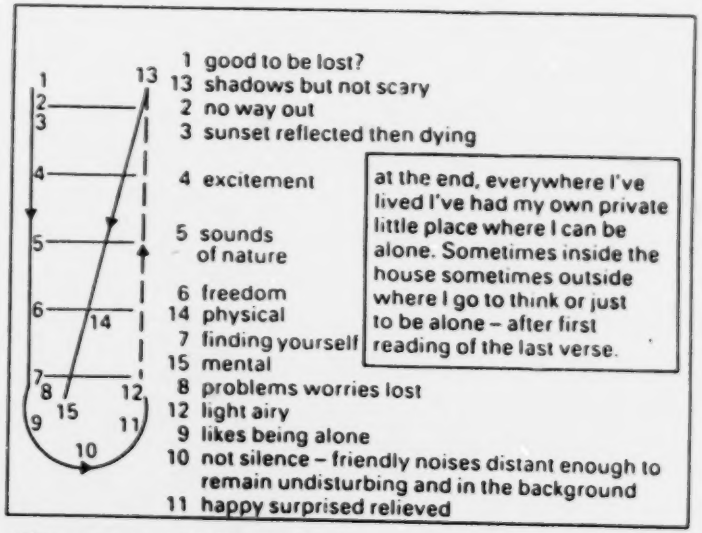
Kristina's initial responses to 'Frogs in the Wood'


8 below you
1 childhood lost e.g. fairground
9 personal associations started memories of being frightened and isolated
3 light failing, blurred eyesight, sunset
2 frightened child/animal
4 vivid memories of self as lost child
5 turns away from self and looks and listens around picture of frogs and streams and herons below viewpoint, e.g. in a valley/dip in the land.
6 loss
7 recall own memories and apply to self
10 this time memories of more recent incidents of childhood in earlier verses

The movement of Kristina's responses to 'Frogs in the Wood'


The middle of the poem reminded me of a week ago when I got lost with others in a wood. The responsibility of finding the way was no longer there
2 woods
3 water on fire like burning oil on water
4 you make the only noise amplified
7 dense undergrowth crashing through
5 looking around you
8 all worries gone
1 to lose something is not always a bad thing
6 relief at not having to find your way any more now that you are lost

The movement of Colin's responses to 'Frogs in the Wood'


1 good to be lost?
13 shadows but not scary
2 no way out
3 sunset reflected then dying
4 excitement
5 sounds of nature
6 freedom
14 physical
7 finding yourself
15 mental
8 problems worries lost
12 light airy
9 likes being alone
10 not silence – friendly noises distant enough to remain undisturbing and in the background
11 happy surprised relieved
at the end, everywhere I've lived I've had my own private little place where I can be alone. Sometimes inside the house sometimes outside where I go to think or just to be alone – after first reading of the last verse.

The movement of Elizabeth's responses to 'Frogs in the Wood'

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Kristina's responses are shown in their original longhand and then in diagrammatic form where the five horizontal lines represent the verses of the poem, the solid lines indicate continuous reading, and the broken lines where the reader jumped from one part of the poem to another. Colin's and Elizabeth's responses are given only as diagrams.

John Teasey's detailed analyses make fascinating reading. I wish to confine myself to three general observations:

(i) The **substance** of the responses has some common elements - the use of mental imagery, personal memories or associations, and an awareness of the emotional weight of the poem - yet, clearly, the students are beginning to construct highly personal readings.

(ii) The **strategies** for reading and note-making are markedly individual, as these rough mental maps show; a phenomenon which challenges the sort of pedagogy which consists solely of the teacher's guided tour through the text line by line.

(iii) And further, that in enabling students to begin to tell the story of their reading - for some went on to tape-record a commentary on their "reading", to share their ideas in discussion, or to write up their responses more formally - it was apparent that, as storytellers, they became more deeply involved with the literature and made it more their own.

The background to this work was the proliferation of reader-response writings during the 1970s and 80s which, increasingly, it seemed to me, forged a new relationship between the act of reading and the act of teaching of literature which held important implications for classroom practice. Indeed, as I want to argue now, reader-response has fast become the new orthodoxy.

To justify this statement I need to back-track a little.

2. Why Reader-Response has replaced the Leavis/New Criticism hegemony in literature teaching

Thirty years ago, English teaching in schools and universities was operating largely within a liberal humanist ideology, influenced, as I indicated earlier, directly or indirectly by the work of F.R. Leavis. Nowadays, with Leavisite cultural elitism discredited, and the explosion in modern literary theory producing at best exciting new ways of reading and at worst a new intellectual elitism, literature teachers have increasingly tended to find a sense of direction in the area of reader-response theory and practice. Theoretical writings of the 1970s in this area were succeeded by a rash of publications on the methodology of literature teaching (Protherough 1983; Benton and Fox 1985; Scholes 1985; Cooper 1985; Dias and Hayhoe 1988; Benton et al 1988) culminating in Britain in the high profile given to the reader's response to literature in the National Curriculum as embodied in the Cox Report (1989), which still survives despite Government interference in 1992. Such has been what one standard book on modern literary theory calls "the vertiginous rise of reader-response criticism" (Jefferson and Robey, 1986, 2nd edn. p.142), that its authors see it as threatening to engulf all other approaches.

Reader-response criticism is a broad church as a reading of the various overview books demonstrates (Tompkins, 1980; Suleiman and Crosman, 1980; Freund, 1987). Nonetheless, a number of principles can be said to characterise this critical stance. First is the rejection of the notorious "Affective Fallacy". In describing the "fallacy" as "a confusion of the poem and its results", and in dismissing as mere "impressionism and relativism" any critical judgements based on the psychological effects of literature, Wimsatt and Beardsley had left no space for the reader to inhabit. They ignored the act of reading. New Criticism, it could be said, invented 'the assumed reader'; by contrast, reader-response criticism deals with real and implied readers. Iser, Holland, Bleich and Fish

operate from a philosophical basis that displaces the notion of an autonomous text to be examined in and on its own terms from the centre of critical discussion and substitutes the reader's re-creation of that text. Reading is not the discovering of meaning (like some sort of archaeological 'dig') but the creation of it. My purpose in rehearsing this familiar history is its importance for teaching. The central concerns of response-oriented approaches focus upon

(i) what constitutes the source of literary meaning; and

(ii) what is the nature of the interpretative process that creates it.

Both issues are fundamental to classroom action.

The works of Iser on fiction and Rosenblatt on poetry, despite some criticism that Iser has attracted on theoretical grounds, have nonetheless had greater influence upon the actual teaching of literature than those of any other theoretical writers. No doubt this is because they avoid what Frank Kermode calls "free-floating theory" and concentrate, in Iser's words, on "an analysis of what actually happens when one is reading" (1978, p.19). Iser's theory of aesthetic response (1978) and Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work (1978; 1985) have helped change the culture of the classroom to one which, as John Lucas notes in the TLS, Nov. 1987, operates on the principle that the text cannot be said to have a meaningful existence outside the relationship between itself and its reader(s). This transfer of power represents a sea-change in critical emphasis and in pedagogical practice from the assumptions most critics and teachers held even a generation ago. Yet it is evolutionary change, not sudden revolution - a progressive rethinking of the way readers create literary experiences for themselves with poems and stories. In fact, reader-response is the evolutionary successor to Leavisite liberal humanism. There are a number of reasons which help to explain its appeal to literature teachers. I want to focus on

just three.

(1) <u>It honours both the integrity of the text and of the reader</u>

There is a clear focus, as in Leavis, upon the concrete experience of the reading of the text, yet without the cultural and aesthetic snobbery that disfigures criticism from that earlier period. Leavis's concrete was laid down to last; areas of "felt experience" were "concretely enacted" in language. He writes of their realisation in particular literary works as if they are there before us with all the immediacy of their physical properties. These are the concrete blocks of a stable state.

By contrast, the "concretisation" of Ingarden and Iser directly challenges the stability of the text. Literary meaning is "an effect to be experienced", not "an object to be defined" (Iser 1978, p.10). This interaction of text and reader defines the literary work as a never-completed unfolding of its effective history and meaning. Every reading of every reader is a unique blend of what the text provokes and the reader brings.

Yet, in Iser's theory if not in Fish's, the text remains to give continuous focus to the reader's response and, in doing so, both prevents the anarchy of "any response goes" and ensures that the character of each reading is shaped in significant measure from the words on the page. In this respect, reader-response theory provides both continuity and change - an evolutionary appeal, particularly attractive to literature teachers with its focus upon responsiveness. This concern with pedagogy, most clearly seen in Rosenblatt's work, goes back to Richards but without the debilitating effect that his notorious "ten difficulties" produced in the literature teaching that derived from <u>Practical Criticism</u> (1929). In Rosenblatt's transactional theory the relationship between

the nature of reading and the teaching of literature is central; and her portrait of the reader has an altogether more human face than others to be found in modern criticism (Rosenblatt, 1970, pp. 30-31). Each 'reading' is to be understood in the context of the whole literary and life experience of an individual. A reader's personality, needs, interests and so on are significant mediators in any response. This fuller role preserves the participatory reader from being merely an intellectual cipher that is implied, for example,by Wayne Booth, without consigning the reader to the analyst's couch as a transformational theorist like Holland is tempted to do; and it derives directly from Rosenblatt's belief that literature stands in a unique relationship with knowledge. Literature does not provide information as much as experience. "Literature provides a living-through, not simply knowledge about" (Rosenblatt, 1970, p.38). This, in turn, suggests a second reason why response- orientated work appeals to literature teachers.

(2) It reflects the contemporary concern for process as well as product.

There are plentiful examples in modern literary theory and in reading theory of approaches and techniques which reduce the reading process to a ready-made system of analysis, or give what Richard Rorty has called "methodical readings" (Eco, 1992, pp.106-107). These are ones which, far from offering a sense of fresh encounter of new vital experience, settle instead for the utilitarian opportunity to use a text as a specimen reiterating a type, or an example on which to exercise particular skills or techniques. Sadly, there are many instances, too, where classroom method reduces what should be the experience of literature to the arid inquisition of just another sort of textbook. In theory and practice, in literary and educational studies, there is the constant danger of

dealing with aesthetic experiences in reductive ways. As Rosenblatt (1985, p.39) says: "....keeping the aesthetic transaction central (has) important implications for questions raised and methods used in both teaching and research."

In contrast to Richards's enquiry in which his "WASP-male-public school" students gave their considered written responses to a text over the course of several days, Rosenblatt was more interested in having her students use jottings "to discover the paths by which (they) approached even a tentative first interpretation". (1978, p.7). The empirical work from which my opening examples were taken (Benton, 1988) was similarly concerned to invite readers to make articulate the early stages of literary response that are often ignored or forgotten and to expose the ongoing processes of reading. These studies support Rosenblatt's transactional theory and, in particular, illustrate the two complementary functions of words in a poetic text. First, the text acts as a stimulus activating elements of the reader's literary and life experience. Secondly, the text serves as a blueprint, a guide for the reader to select, reject and order his or her own response. The text thus has both generative and regulatory functions. In our acts of teaching, these acts of reading experienced by our students are ones that lie behind the classroom dialogue; our methodology should coax such processes into the texture of classroom activity.

In practical terms, as I will illustrate shortly,this implies the use of exploratory talk and informal writing to monitor, record and share one's thinking with that of others. Such activities follow from a theoretical position which can live comfortably with the idea of resisting closure, with meanings not fixed, with the infinitely renewable quality of literary experience. By starting where the readers are and thus avoiding the twin tendencies

to explication du texte and to premature value judgements - the Scylla and Charybdis of classroom methods between which many a poem has been crushed - response-oriented approaches claim to hold the reader's initial engagement with a text and develop it in ways that are both valid and valued by students as interpretive acts.

(3) It redefines the question of value

By asserting the importance of the individual's "reading" of a text, response-oriented approaches are in tune with contemporary thinking which has preferred to define value in transitive terms (texts have value for given people in particular contexts) rather than to locate value as an inherent quality of the text itself.

One way of translating such a definition into practice is to see the classroom as a micro-version of Fish's interpretive community where the value students find in literary works is an attribute discovered over time through the exercise of common interpretive strategies rather than a judgement on one or other occasion. Valuing literature is a process of coming to know, of growing personal ownership.

This view of literary value has implications for the concept of the canon. Over time, the aggregate of readings by particular people in particular contexts grows into a collection of what a society deems to be highly valued texts.

In this way our work with students plays its part in the "historical evolution of art" which, as Kundera (1988, p.152) reminds us, is not a mere succession of events but an essential pursuit of values. He remarks:

"If we reject the question of value and settle for a description (thematic, sociological, formalist) of a

work (of a historical period, culture, etc.); if we equate all cultures and all cultural activities (Bach and rock, comic strips and Proust); if the criticism of art (meditation on value) can no longer find room for expression, then the 'historical evolution of art' will lose its meaning, will crumble, will turn into a vast and absurd storehouse of works".

The relationship between response and responsibility (to self and text) is reader-response criticism's counter to such a Dunciadical vision. Instead it offers an alternative picture of a constantly revalued anthology of texts which renews itself both by the inclusion of new works from diverse sources and by the reappraisal of older, existing works. This prospect of a continuously revisable canon goes some way towards meeting the well-known arguments levelled at the traditional canon that it is male-dominated, culturally unrepresentative, resistant to change, and both exclusive and narrow in its definition of what constitutes a "text".

The effect of these three points is that reader-response theory and practice is perceived - within the area of literature teaching - as providing a framework of now familiar ideas which are widely accepted and to which other lines of critical activity often make reference : the plurality of meanings within a literary work; the creative participation of the reader; the acknowledgement that the reader is not a 'tabula rasa' but brings idiosyncratic knowledge and personal style to the act of reading; and the awareness that interpretation is socially, historically and culturally formed.

3. Reader-response approaches to poetry with L2 students

The question remains : are response-oriented practices, developed on these bases, and similar to those

indicated earlier, appropriate for work with L2 students? Last academic year I was living in Denmark and was able to work both with teachers of English at the School of Educational Studies and with some first-year students in the Department of Rhetoric at Copenhagen University. In both cases the indications were that their previous experiences of poems had largely been confined to the explication of meanings : whole areas - the auditory sense, their feel for poetic form, their awareness of themselves as readers of poems - seemed to have been by-passed. Accordingly, I set up a sequence of classroom activities designed to engage them more fully in the process of response.

I will comment only on the first-year students' work since this is likely to be closer to most people's professional concerns. The students were not especially able in English; after all, they were following a main course in Rhetoric, taught in Danish, and their work with me was an optional extra last semester on poetry in English and taught in English.

I began by asking two questions I usually find help to open up such groups :

(i) What are the differences between reading for information and reading literature?

(ii) What are the differences between <u>how</u> you read fiction and <u>how</u> you read poetry?

Discussion of the first question helpfully raised issues about the status of literary works, the language and forms in which they are cast, and allowed us to examine the use of some key words when one student remarked : "Imaging in literary reading is important"; and another that "aesthetic qualities" don't really matter in non-literary

texts. The second question lead to discussion of ease and difficulty in reading, the experience of re-reading, and questions of time and linearity in the novel and the spatial qualities of poems. The discussions seemed to indicate that the students were drawing upon their experience of reading outside the literary classroom rather than their experiences of being taught inside it.

The activities with poems aimed to deepen their experiences as readers. For example, we read a range of poems, focussing upon the nature of reading silently and reading aloud. Prepared readings to an audience of peers, even with only a few minutes rehearsal, proved an exacting and enjoyable task. Or again, we followed a five-phase individual procedure with Blake's The Sick Rose in which the students

- copied out the poem in the centre of an A4 sheet
- annotated and numbered their initial responses
- made a quick diagram which 'mapped' their reading
- commented on their own reading strategy
- wrote a single sentence statement summarising their initial response before, sixthly, they discussed these responses in pairs.

Apart from some ambivalence about doing the diagram (some describing it as a "funny way" to visualise their reading, others finding it gave them an insight into their thought processes), the advantages of these activities were evident. Copying out slows down the reading speed to that of writing, creating the mental space to reflect upon the lines as the pen reproduces them. Annotating the text and noting the reading strategy give a sense of how the reader

has made the poem his or her own. The students' comments about this informal jotting around the poem acknowledge that initial responses are difficult to capture and that their notes might even be deceiving as the process is so fast; yet they seemed aware that this is in the nature of all stated responses and that, in the process of learning, this sort of mapping has clear benefits. They remarked:-

"you're not so pressured to get meaning"; and

"you don't have to be clever right away"; and

"you can find your own way into the poem".

There was, similarly, strong support for pair (as opposed to group) discussions where, as the students were quick to point out, the demand is continuous and there's nowhere to hide.

Later sessions were of two sorts. Some were based upon pairs of paintings and poems from Double Vision (M. & P. Benton, 1990). It was clear that these L2 students found the visual/verbal combinations as engaging and accessible as had the L1 students with whom I have used the same material and approaches (Benton 1992, chapters 9 & 10). The other sessions were based upon a collection of duplicated poems compiled to provide a variety of voices and challenges. The students were invited to choose one or more poems to work on in some of the ways we had tried out with "The Sick Rose" and, if they wished, to add other activities such as tape-recording their responses, or writing a pastiche.

Here are two examples.

Grete chose to work on Ted Hughes's "A Childish Prank" from Crow. In Hughes's sequence of poems Crow represents

the mistakes that God has made. Crow is God's nightmare, a mistake that constantly reasserts itself as a potent, mocking, destructive force. In "A Childish Prank" Crow invents sex. God has created Adam and Eve and drops off to sleep wondering what to do with them. Enter Crow : the villain who gives the Genesis story a touch of melodrama. Here is the poem with Grete's initial responses. Her original script is reproduced to show her actual jottings and her indication, on the left, of how her reading related to her note-making.

A CHILDISH PRANK

Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls. ⑥ Soul = sexuality
Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert ② Activity comes with sexual desire
On the flowers of Eden.
God pondered.

The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep.

Crow laughed.
He bit the Worm, God's only son ⑧ why is the Worm God's son ??
Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half
With the wounded end hanging out. ① Pathetic, pitiful manhood

He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman
And it crept in deeper and up
Wormy eyes ⑩ To peerout through her eyes ④ woman's sexual power over men
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O it was painful. ③ Sexual longing. The strong need for man + woman to unite.

Man awoke being dragged across the grass. ④ as if he gets dragged by
Woman awoke to see him coming. ⑤ his sexuality, the worm - his penis
Neither knew what had happened. as if woman are never overcome with sexual desire, as if she just lies and waits for man to come along.

God went on sleeping.

Crow went on laughing.

TED HUGHES.

⑨ Sexual desire - ~~[illegible]~~ is painful.
Every time man and woman are not united in the flesh they are only half, and the separation leaves a big bleeding wound. They are forever doomed to be painfully apart ~~and Baby~~ relieved only with few sporadic moments of unity. But the worm will remain parted; Man and woman used to be one, but can never become one again.

⑪ I wonder why TH has chosen the head half to go into the woman and the tailhalf into the man. The tail is worse off without the head, than the other way around. Does this mean that man's desire and hence suffering is greater than ... ?

Grete read the poem through twice and then, half way through a third reading, began to annotate the text. She took about 20 minutes in all to produce these eleven jottings. Her movement round the poem shows how her attention focussed on the central sexual image (lines 10-17) of the Worm invading the two bodies; all but three of her comments relate directly to these lines.

Grete's Initial Responses

A Childish Prank

Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls, (6) soul = sexuality
Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert (7) activity comes with sexual desire
On the flowers of Eden.
God pondered.

The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep

Crow laughed.
He bit the Worm, God's only son, (8) Why is the Worm God's son??
Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half
With the wounded end hanging out. (1) Pathetic, pitiful manhood

He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman
And it crept in deeper and up
Wormy eyes (10) *To peer out through her eyes* (2) woman's sexual power over men
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O <u>it was painful</u>. (3) sexual longing. The strong need for man & woman to unite.

He awoke being dragged across the grass. (4) as if he gets dragged by his sexuality, the Worm - his penis
Woman awoke to see him coming. (5) as if woman is never overcome with sexual desire: as if she just lies and waits for man to come along.
Neither knew what had happened.

God went on sleeping.
Crow went on laughing.

TED HUGHES.

(9) Sexual desire is painful. Every time man and woman are not united in the flesh they are only half, and the separation leaves a big bleeding wound. They are forever doomed to be painfully apart relieved only with few sporadic moments of unity. But the Worm will remain parted; man and woman used to be one, but can never become one again.

(11) I wonder why T.H. has chosen the head half to go into the woman and the tail half into the man. The tail is worse off without a head, than the other way around. Does this mean that man's desire and hence suffering is greater than woman's?

Interpretatively, Grete has travelled some distance in a short time. Comments 1 to 5 show that she has felt the power of a symbolism which reduces man and woman to soulless and loveless creatures who experience only the painful urge to join the two ends of the internal serpent together. And in 5 and 11, she is already questioning a text that implies a passive role for woman.

Her other question is the equation of the Worm with God's son, 8, which perhaps indicate that, without the advantage of reading, the poem in its sequence, she has not quite tuned in to the black comedy which typifies the whole tone of Crow. Even so, her longest comment, 9, acts as a summary statement and shows a clear grasp of the main idea of Crow despoiling God's creation of man and woman.

Two further related points are worth mentioning. First, as an L2 student, Grete experienced little difficulty in operating in English and using "jottings" to hold and develop her initial responses. Indeed, the informality of this procedure seemed a benefit rather than a problem to the students : using writing to think with to make purposeful yet provisional comments on a text is quite different from producing "final draft" writing.

Yet, of course, she was now in a strong position to write a more formal piece, probably in essay form, if one was required. It was one of the two most positive views that the students expressed about the work (the other being their enjoyment of the active participation demanded) that a mix of two or three of these lead-in strategies was a most helpful preparation for essay writing.

Jens chose to work on the poem "Rainbow" by John Agard, a Caribbean writer who has lived in Britain for the past fifteen years and become well-known through his books, T.V. appearances, and dynamic public performances of his work. The poem is written in non-standard English and demands a non-standard presentation - a challenge to the L2 student to interpret and to a white

English lecturer to perform.

Here is John Agard's "Rainbow" :

Rainbow

When you see
de rainbow
you know
God know
wha he doing—
one big smile
across the sky—
I tell you
God got style
the man got style

When you see
raincloud pass
and de rainbow
make a show
I tell you
is God doing
limbo
the man doing
limbo

But sometimes
you know
when I see
de rainbow
so full of glow
and curving
like she bearing child
I does want know
if God
ain't a woman

If that is so
the woman got style
man she got style

JOHN AGARD

Jens devised an interesting sequence of activities and provided a commentary on his work from which I'll quote some extracts.

(1) He started by writing the poem out and commented : "To me this is a good way of getting 'close' to the poem because it forces down the speed of perception". And he went on to say that during the copying out he came to think of Wordsworth's "My heart leaps up" and of "the great differences in language and attitude between the two poems". He was made aware, too, of the non-standard language in spelling and sentence construction.

(2) He then re-read the poem and made five comments on the way through. This sequence is straightforward partly, no doubt, because he's already internalised the poem to some extent through transcribing it, and partly because of the poem's uncomplicated narrative line.

RAINBOW

When you see
de rainbow
you know
God know
wha he doing-
one big smile
across the sky-
I tell you
God got style
the man got style

1 The shape of a rainbow is not like a smile, it is quite opposite!

2 God is human - no great force to fear - just one of the guys.

When you see
raincloud pass
and de rainbow
make a show
I tell you
is God doing
limbo
the man doing
limbo

3 Now God is doing limbo- he really is one of the guys.

But sometimes
you know
when I see
de rainbow
so full of glow
and curving
like she bearing child
I does want know
if God
ain't a woman

4 Good question! Maybe God is also one of the dolls.

If that is so
the woman got style
man she got style

5 Playing on the word "man" in its double function. I like that little twist.

JOHN AGARD

(3) A third reading followed when, as he puts it, "I looked at the meaning of the words rather than the words themselves", and which lead him to a general conception that the poem celebrates a genial, stylish, limbo-dancing God smiling at our human confusion over God's gender.

(4) Of his fourth reading he comments:

> "Now I was looking at the pictures. The rainbow as a smile, God dancing limbo, the curving belly - simple pictures that are easily understood and imagined.The tone is light and the feeling is a happy one".

Clearly he realizes that John Agard has avoided the conventional reliance upon the colours of the rainbow and, instead,exploited its shape; and that this enables him to raise a provocative gender issue in a light-hearted way.

(5) Jens hints at this in his single sentence summary :

> "The poem tells me that God is a happy hermaphrodite who knows what it is doing; this is quite another way of seeing God than one is used to".

(6) He then read the poem aloud and acknowledged that, with this poem particularly, this added another dimension to his experience.

(7) Finally, he took up the suggestion to write a pastiche and produced a neatly turned piece in similar idiom, taking the pregnancy image of Agard's poem a stage further and picturing God's son doing limbo under the admiring gaze of his mother - a sort of Caribbean version of the Madonna and Child :-

R A I N B O W P A S T I C H E

And sometimes
she not alone
below her belly
another
rainbow
look just like
her
I tell you
is God's son
doing limbo
the son doing
limbo
under mama's
glow

(4) Conclusions : meanings and methods

In these 'readings' the texts act both as "blueprints" and "stimuli" (Rosenblatt). The practice of reader-response work integrates textual analysis with "affective" criticism and, as these examples show, its strength lies in its dynamic approach to the process of reading. A text is no longer a timeless aesthetic object but rather an unfolding temporal experience grasped through a series of changing viewpoints. If meanings in literature are to be inferred from "procedural activity" (H. Widdowson in Carter 1988, p.18), then our teaching methods are crucial. In practice, this entails approaches that are likely to share four characteristics. They will:-

(i) engage and motivate students because they are both focussed and purposeful in relation to texts, yet open enough to invite, and give validity to, personal responses.

(ii) trust the reader both by adopting an inclusive attitude in the choice and variety of texts, and by giving the literature back to the readers through encouraging students to devise their own activities to open up these texts.

(iii) trust the text by retaining a sense of its potential power to move us - which is why I'm sceptical about the use of functional and mechanistic techniques like cloze and sequencing (very popular in schools and in T.E.F.L. teaching in recent years) and prefer activities which aim to keep the whole poem in view.

(iv) regard the practice of critical evaluation as but one element of "procedural activity" rather than an end in itself, on the basis that our prime responsibility to

our students is to help them become critical readers not literary critics.

Approaches to teaching literature on these bases offer the best chance of enabling our students to become "keen readers"; and, incidentally, enable us to avoid the role of David Lodge's puzzled and slightly manic soccer referee.

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